

**REVIEW: Waltereit, R. 2006. *Abtönung. Zur Pragmatik und historischen Semantik von Modalpartikeln und ihren funktionalen Äquivalenten in romanischen Sprachen*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.**

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With his book *Abtönung* (literally ‘downtoning’<sup>1</sup>), published in 2006, Richard Waltereit positions himself among the scholars studying modal expressions in Romance languages. Indeed: his main goal is to describe different ways in which Romance languages express the nuances which are marked in German with modal particles. Furthermore, he does not simply want to indicate which means speakers of Romance languages have at their disposal to convey these modal meanings: he wants to go one step further and see why these Romance forms can bring about the same effect as the German modal particles (p.IX).

To do so, he develops a model of downtoning using the German modal particle ‘ja’ as an example (chapter 2), and applies it on a few exemplary cases, which show the diversity of the expressions of modality in the Romance languages. This downtoning model covers two linguistic levels: it deals with both the speech-act-theoretical (or modality-theoretical) and the historical-semantic aspects of downtoning.

On the speech-act-theoretical level, downtoners are used to justify speech acts, or to modify utterances which would not fit within the discursive context in such a way that they do fit in. In this respect, downtoners show that the speaker anticipates to the hearer’s reaction, as she herself indicates how the utterance – which would otherwise be seen as an infringement of the discursive coherence – fits within the context. In other words, the downtoning elements are used to avoid that the hearer would consider the utterance as inappropriate or out of place. Thus, downtoners affect both the relation between the speaker and the hearer and the relation between the utterance and its context.

The historical-semantic side of the downtoning model is based on the observation that most downtoners have a homophonous counterpart which does not have a downtoning function. More precisely, the relation between the two forms is one of poly- or heterosemy, as the downtoning use of the form has emerged from the non-downtoning use (such so-called ‘divergence’ is a typical aspect of language change processes like grammaticalization<sup>2</sup>). Waltereit claims that this relation is latently present when a downtoner is used: the downtoning form evokes a typical context of its non-downtoning counterpart. By ‘evoking’,

Waltereit means that some sort of link to this context is activated in the minds of the interlocutors, but that no real reference is made to it. In other words, the interlocutors are not communicating ‘as if’ they were in this other context, but the downtoner brings about implicatures which modify or modalize the context in the same way as the conventionalized meaning of its non-downtoning counterpart would. In the case of ‘*quand même*’ (one of Waltereit’s cases studies, p.75-ff), for instance, this means that the utterance is contrasted with its negative counterpart. In the non-downtoning use, this negative counterpart is present in the discourse, explicitly or implicitly by what was said before. In the downtoning use, on the other hand, this counterpart is presupposed pragmatically. This means that an utterance like ‘*j’ai quand même dormi*’ ‘I slept *quand même*’ is ambiguous between the readings ‘I didn’t plan to sleep, yet I slept’ (non-downtoning) and ‘you don’t seem to be noticing that I slept’ (downtoning). One could say that this is again a feature of grammaticalization, viz. ‘persistence’ or ‘retention’. It has been shown (e.g. Schoonjans and Lauwers, in press) that this relation with the source form (in this case the non-downtoning one) can shine through clearly in the target form (in this case the downtoning one). To what extent one can claim that this is the case in the more bleached (i.e. the more grammaticalized) uses as well, is a question which can be raised, but Waltereit certainly has a point in stating that it plays an important role in the development of dtoners.

In section 2.6 (p.61-f), Waltereit raises two fundamental questions in respect to this model as a whole. The first one is especially interesting in view of the diversity of dtoners that are discussed in the following chapters: aren’t the effects brought about by the different dtoners too heterogeneous to treat them as one category? Waltereit claims they are not: the description given above (dtoners modify the illocutionary function of an utterance in view of the hearer’s expected reaction) demonstrates sufficient functional similarity to bring all dtoners together in one category, whilst excluding non-downtoning elements like discourse markers.

The other question is: to what extent is the downtoning meaning a true meaning of the dtoner, or simply the result of an interpretation of the/a central meaning of this element in the context? An important presupposition for this question is the postulation that dtoners have a meaning at all. Waltereit (p.8) indicates that this has been questioned by several scholars, since dtoners seem to function at another level than what is traditionally seen as ‘meaning’. However, he argues (correctly, in my opinion) that they are not functionless, thus not meaningless. The rest of the answer lies in the question whether one considers the elements in question to be homo- or poly-/heterosemous. Elsewhere in the book (p.9-ff), Waltereit argues that a truly minimalistic (i.e. homosemous) account is hardly tenable, but that on the other hand, one should not overdo the amount of different meanings that are ascribed to one form. In other words, he proposes to take a position of moderate minimalism, or polysemy-without-exaggeration. This means that context-dependency can certainly play a role, but is not the only factor needed in explaining the effect(s) brought about by a dtoner.

A third important issue, which forms the topic of the last chapter, is whether and how downtoning can be distinguished from other pragmatic phenomena, like politeness and weakening, and whether there is need to do so.<sup>3</sup> Waltereit shows that there is, since not all cases of downtoning are examples of

politeness or weakening, and since these phenomena seem to function at different levels.

After having developed this downtoning model and after having illustrated it with the German modal particle 'ja' in chapter 2, Waltereit applies it to four exemplary cases: the use of 'quand même' in French (chapter 3), Portuguese diminutives (chapter 4), the prosodic Fall-Rise pattern (chapter 5), and right dislocation in Italian (chapter 6). These are four means of downtoning from different domains: lexicology, morphology, phonology, and syntax, so only his choice of examples already proves the diversity of the downtoners in the Romance languages.

The first example is close to the German modal particles: French 'quand même'. Waltereit calls it a 'downtoning particle' (p.75), a term which he defines on p.18 as a discourse particle with a downtoning function. The term 'modal particle' has a more restricted sense, indicating a subset of the downtoning particles, viz. those which are generally called 'modal particles' in German linguistics.<sup>4</sup> Note that he uses the term 'discourse particle' in his definition of 'downtoning particle'. From this follows that 'modal particles' are *de facto* discourse particles as well, whereas he states himself (section 1.2) that this is a problematic assumption. Furthermore, it does not seem to me that discourse particles are the only particles (except for modal particles) which can function as downtoners, so the hyperonym 'particle' (as a cover term for all non-inflected forms) appears to be more suited here.

On page 91, Waltereit indicates that 'quand même' is very similar to modal particles. Still it cannot be one, he claims (p.75), because real modal particles can only occur in the so-called 'middle field', and Romance languages don't have one. This is a problematic assumption, as it has been shown (e.g. Thurmair 1989:25-ff; Imo 2008) that German modal particles can occur outside of the middle field (even though they typically stand in it). Furthermore, some scholars (e.g. Mosegaard Hansen 1998:41) have proposed to use the term 'modal particle' to refer to such French particles. It is noteworthy, in this respect, that in later publications (e.g. Waltereit and Detges 2007, 2009), Waltereit adopts the term 'modal particle' for French words like 'bien'. One might thus ask whether it is legitimate to claim that 'quand même' cannot be a modal particle simply because French doesn't have a middle field, but for the rest of Waltereit's (2006) exposition, this issue is of lesser importance.

The chapter about 'quand même' has the same basic structure as the two others that deal with segmental means of downtoning, viz. chapter 4 on diminutives (with focus on Portuguese) and chapter 6 on right dislocation (with focus on Italian). Waltereit begins each of these chapters with a brief introductory description. He then offers an analysis of the form under investigation, following the lines of his downtoning model and using ample examples to illustrate his observations. Thereby, he always deals with the speech-act-theoretical level first, before explaining the origin of the downtoning use by focusing on its diachrony. After this analysis, a final section is added with a brief reference to other, similar phenomena (in the same or other Romance languages) from the same domain (lexicon, morphology, or syntax).

Chapter 5, which is the only one to deal with a suprasegmental downtoner (viz. the prosodic pattern named Fall-Rise contour), is a bit different. The three main parts (the introduction and the two stages of the application of the downtoning model) return, in the same order, but Waltereit mainly uses English

and German examples to work out the analysis. He admittedly starts off with a summary of previous studies on Romance languages showing that prosody can carry meaning, but then focuses on English and German examples, only to mention the Romance languages sporadically, except at the end, where he compares the use of the Fall-Rise contour in different languages.

Summing up, Waltereit's book *Abtönung* offers an interesting overview of the diversity of ways to express downtoning meanings in the Romance languages. It is well-structured, starting with a theoretical introduction in which the most important and most relevant preceding theories about modality and downtoning are presented in a clear and sufficiently detailed way. After this introduction, he starts to compose his own model of downtoning, which he illustrates with the German modal particle 'ja'. In a third step, he applies this model to a few exemplary cases, which are chosen in such a way to demonstrate the diversity of downtoners in the Romance languages: he deals with lexical, morphological, prosodic and syntactic means to downtone an utterance, without claiming exhaustiveness (p.IX).

It is not clear to me whether in all these cases, the (or a) normal form in German to express the downtoning meaning is a modal particle, as the subtitle suggests (*Zur Pragmatik und historischen Semantik von Modalpartikeln und ihren funktionalen Äquivalenten in romanischen Sprachen*). Still Waltereit's analysis sheds an interesting light on downtoning in general, and on all types of downtoners in particular, also those which are not generally referred to as downtoning particles. This book can certainly be a source of inspiration for following studies of downtoners.

## References

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## <sup>1</sup>Notes

I will continue using the term ‘downtoning’ when Waltereit uses ‘Abtönung’. Terms like ‘modality’ and ‘modal particle’ will thus be restricted to those cases where he speaks of ‘Modalität’ and ‘Modalpartikel’.

<sup>2</sup> Waltereit (p.101-ff) actually argues that one should see the development of downtoners, the development of discourse particles, and grammaticalization as three different processes. Taking into account ‘Occam’s razor’, I would rather follow Auer and Günthner (2003:16-ff) in seeing the two former ones as non-prototypical cases of the latter, but for the present exposition, this is not of major importance.

<sup>3</sup> Note that in this respect, ‘Abtönung’/‘downtoning’ is perhaps not the most appropriate term, since it seems to suggest weakening. This is probably due to the fact, mentioned by Waltereit (p.186), that downtoning has often been seen as a form of weakening.

<sup>4</sup> Thus ‘modal particle’ and ‘downtoning particle’ are not used synonymously in this book, whereas they usually are in other descriptions. One could ask whether there are no better terms to make this distinction, avoiding this particular use of the term ‘downtoning particle’, but since Waltereit defines his uses of the terms clearly at the beginning and uses them consistently, this might not be a major problem.